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ABSTRACT

"Learning autobiography," "learning career," and "learning trajectory" are related descriptors for the process of developing attitudes toward learning and the origins of interests, learning styles, and learning processes. The learning career is composed of events, activities, and interpretations that develop individual learning dispositions over time. Research by Bloomer and Hodkinson as well as the Stanford Learning Center project, has depicted the learning career as a structured and structuring series of choices and decisions that are part of a wider set of values and relationships. The learning portfolio is a way of documenting and reflecting on one's learning career. The learning trajectory has been conceptualized in a number of ways. De Weerdt et al. define it as the arc of a learning process that consists of orientation, elaboration, and integration. Gorard et al. define it as the aggregate of an individual's learning experiences across a life span, determined by social capital, contextual factors, and individual choices that reflect learner identity. The concepts of learning autobiography, learning career, and learning trajectory make clear the influence of sociocultural context and structure on individual learning characteristics. (An annotated bibliography listing 19 publications and 5 World Wide Web sites constitutes approximately 75% of this document.) (MO)

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TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERT

NO. 45

Learning Careers/Learning Trajectories

by Sandra Kerka
2003

An individual's learning career or autobiography describes the development of attitudes toward learning and the origins of interests, learning styles, and learning processes. The terms "learning autobiography," "learning career," and "learning trajectory" are related but not quite interchangeable descriptors for this process. This Alert describes these concepts and provides resources for further information.

The learning career is composed of events, activities, and interpretations that develop individual learning dispositions over time. Bloomer and Hodkinson's (2000a,b,c) study of British young adults found that learning careers are marked by both continuity and change and are influenced by social, material, and cultural contexts. The Stanford Learning Career project attempted to track 30 freshmen throughout their undergraduate learning careers to identity the contextual influences that transform them (Chen 1999). Other research (Crossan et al. 2003; Gallacher et al. 2002; Merrill et al. 2001) focused on nontraditional adult learners whose learning careers and identities as learners are fragmented and nonlinear. These studies depict the learning career as a structured and structuring series of choices and decisions that are part of a wider set of values and relationships. The learning portfolio is a way of documenting and reflecting on one's learning career. Brown (2002) used portfolios to help adults identify learning through work and community activities. The Stanford project used Electronic Learning Portfolios, individualized portable electronic knowledge databases (Chen and Mazow 2002).

The learning trajectory has been conceptualized in several ways. For DeWeerdt et al. (2002), the learning trajectory is the arc of a learning process that consists of orientation (awareness of learning needs), elaboration (knowing and doing), and integration (application of learning). Gorard et al. (1997, 1998; Gorard and Rees 2002) have published a series of reports on their study of the learning histories of 1,104 adults. They define the learning trajectory as the aggregate of an individual's learning experiences across the life span, determined by social capital, contextual factors, and individual choices that reflect learner identity. Somewhat controversially, they state the quasi-determinist view that characteristics set very early (age, gender, family) largely predict later-life trajectories and conclude that efforts to increase learning participation will not help people who do not see themselves as learners. These researchers are now exploring how information/communications technologies (ICT) for learning influences learning trajectories, suggesting that mere access to ICT does not make participation more likely (Gorard, Rees, Fevre, and Furlong 2002; Selwyn, Gorard, and Williams 2002).

The concepts of learning autobiography/career/trajectory make clear the influence of sociocultural context, structure, onindividual characteristics with learning. A number of tools that educators can use to make individuals aware of their learning identity have been developed (Brown 2002; Dominicé 2000; Merriam and Clark 1991). The resources listed here also address the extent to which educational institutions and workplaces are able to influence individual learning careers (Hake 1999; Hodkinson and Bloomer 2001; Jorgensen and Warring 2002).

Resources

Bloomer, M., and Hodkinson, P. "Learning Career: Conceptualising Transformations in Young People and Their Learning." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000a. (ED 440 278)

Bloomer, M., and Hodkinson, P. "Learning Careers: Continuity and Change in Young People's Dispositions to Learning." ***British Educational Research Journal*** 26, no. 5 (December 2000b): 583-597.

Bloomer, M., and Hodkinson, P. "The Complexity and Unpredictability of Young People's Learning Careers." ***Education + Training*** 42, no. 2 (2000c): 68-74.
A 4-year study of 50 young British adults aged 16-19 in further education found that (1) few made informed choices about courses and careers; (2) most experienced significant unpredictability and complexity in their learning careers; (3) economic and cultural capital played an important role; and (4) structured policy approaches sometimes worsened outcomes.

Brown, J. O. "The Portfolio: A Tool for Workplace Learning and Development." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA, April 1-5, 2002. (ED 463 311)
Workers who developed experiential learning portfolios in their undergraduate degree programs were interviewed. Major themes identified through these interviews were an increased recognition of professional accomplishments, a greater appreciation of the workplace as a learning venue, and an enhanced understanding of the role of mentors in workplace learning.

Chen, H. L. "Learning Careers Project: Year One Summary 1." Stanford, CA: Stanford Learning Laboratory, Stanford University, December 1999. http://sll.stanford.edu/projects/hlc/LCP_Year1.pdf
Freshmen's learning careers were followed over time to discover how formal and informal learning as well as individuals, programs, departments, and institutional resources contributed to the overall learning experience. Activities included learning communities, a web forum, self-coaching curriculum, and electronic learning portfolio or E-Folio.

Chen, H. L., and Mazow, C. "Electronic Learning Portfolios and Student Affairs." ***NASPA's NetResults***. Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Innovations in Learning, October 28, 2002. http://www.naspa.org/netresults/PrinterFriendly.cfm?ID=825
The E-Folio component of the Learning Careers Project led to the concept of Folio Thinking, a reflective practice that situates and guides the effective use of learning portfolios. Folio Thinking aims to encourage students to integrate discrete learning experiences, enhance self-understanding, promote responsibility for learning, and support students in developing an intellectual identity.

Crossan, B.; Field, J.; Gallacher, J.; and Merrill, B. "Understanding Participation in Learning for Non-traditional Adult Learners: Learning Careers and the Construction of Learning Identities." ***British Journal of Sociology of Education*** 24, no. 1 (February 2003): 55-67.
In a conceptual challenge to a unilinear concept of learning careers, data from a study of new entrants to Scottish further education colleges show that learner identities can be fragile, contingent, and vulnerable to external changes. They can incorporate elements of hostility to education, as well as a degree of denial of responsibility.

De Weerdt, S.; Corthouts, F.; Martens, H.; and Bouwen, R. "Developing Professional Learning Environments: Model and Application." ***Studies in Continuing Education*** 24, no. 1 (May 2002): 25-38.
Conceptualizes the learning trajectory as a complex interplay of orientation, elaboration, and integration. Illustrates the model with a case study of a training program aimed at organizational change. Identifies tensions between the three components and the trainer's role.

Dominicé, P. ***Learning from Our Lives: Using Educational Biographies with Adults***. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.
Describes the educational biography approach developed at the University of Geneva. Discusses how it can help learners reflect on their educational experiences and deepen understanding of their own ways of learning and "indigenous" knowledge.

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Gallacher, J.; Crossan, B.; and Field, J. "Learning Careers and the Social Space: Exploring the Fragile Identities of Adult Returners in the New Further Education." ***International Journal of Lifelong Education*** 21, no. 6 (November-December 2002): 493-509.
Data from Scottish adults (41 new, 15 continuing, 33 nonparticipants in further education) illustrate the complex process of reengaging in learning. The data demonstrate the influence of social milieu (Bourdieu's notion of habitus)—the personal, institutional, and structural factors that support or limit an individual's learning career.

Gorard, S. et al. ***Lifetime Learning Trajectories: Close Encounters of Five Kinds. Working Paper 7***. 1997. (ED 442 944). ***Plugging the Gap: The Welsh School-Effect and Initial Education Trajectories. Working Paper 8***. 1997. (ED 442 945). ***How to Spot a Lifelong Learner at 40 Paces? The Two Components of Det rmination. Working Paper 9***. 1997. (ED 442 946). ***Space, Mobility and the Education of Minority Groups in Wales: The Survey Results. Working Paper 10***. 1997. (ED 442 947). ***Learning Trajectories: Some Voices of Those "in Transit." Working Paper 11***. 1997. (ED 442 948). ***Family Influences on Participation in Lifelong Learning. Working Paper 15***. 1998. (ED 442 952). Bristol, England: University of Bristol; Cardiff, Wales: University of Cardiff.
These reports from a study of 1,104 Welsh adults present a typology of learning trajectories developed from the data and interpret the findings in a variety of ways.

Gorard, S., and Rees, G. ***Creating a Learning Society? Learning Careers and Their Relevance for Policies of Lifelong Learning***. Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2002.
This book is based on a large-scale study of patterns of lifelong participation in learning, their social and economic determinants, and their impacts on social exclusion. It shows how the determinants of adult participation in learning are deeply rooted in family background and early educational experiences.

Gorard, S.; Rees, G.; and Fevre, R. "Learning Trajectories: Analysing the Determinants of Workplace Learning." Paper presented at ESRC Seminar Series: Working to Learn, Surrey, England, June 24, 1999. (ED 442 016)
The model of lifetime learning trajectories includes more than 40 independent variables that can be summarized in these five broad factors: time, place, gender, family, and initial schooling. The pattern of trajectories has changed over time. Early success or failure at school lays the foundation for learner identity and participation in further education.

Gorard, S.; Rees, G.; Fevre, R.; and Furlong, J. "Learning Trajectories: Travelling towards a Learning Society?" ***International Journal of Lifelong Education*** 17, no. 6 (November-December 1998): 400-410.
In a study that identified patterns of participation as lifelong trajectories, key predictors emerged: period when born, place of birth, gender, family background, and initial schooling. Results called into question the rhetoric about progress toward a Learning Society and the link between education and economic advancement.

Gorard, S. with Rees, G.; Fevre, R.; and Furlong, J. "Lifelong Learning Trajectories in Wales: Results of the NIACE Adult Learners' Survey." 2002. http://www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/ict/niacewales.doc
The 2002 survey reinforces the conclusion that whether or not an individual participates in learning is a lifelong pattern, intrinsically related to long-term social, economic, and educational factors. Access to ICT does not, in itself, make people any more likely to participate in learning.

Gorard, S.; Rees, G.; Fevre, R.; and Welland, T. "Lifelong Learning Trajectories: Some Voices of Those 'in Transit.'" ***International Journal of Lifelong Education*** 20, no. 3 (May-June 2001): 169-187.
Case studies from longitudinal research on adult educational participation identified important determinants of lifelong learning patterns: age, place, gender, family background, and religion. The data suggest that adults' learning choices are made within the framework of subjective opportunity structures, including notions of what is appropriate for individuals.

Hake, B. J. "Lifelong Learning in Late Modernity: The Challenges to Society, Organizations, and Individuals." ***Adult Education Quarterly*** 49, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 79-90.
An alternative perspective views learning as the acquisition of knowledge and skills in social interaction, with a focus on the interplay of societal, organizational, and individual processes that enhance or inhibit the ability to learn to live a life, including the biographical competencies with which individuals manage their learning careers.

Hodkinson, P., and Bloomer, M. "Dropping Out of Further Education: Complex Causes and Simplistic Policy Assumptions." ***Research Papers in Education: Policy & Practice*** 16, no. 2 (June 2001): 117-140.
A study examining contradictions between the complex reasons for college dropout and the simplistic funding and policy assumptions about such "failures" showed that dropout may be better explained in the complex context of an individual's learning career. Current policy approaches ignore this complexity.

Jorgensen, C. H., and Warring, N. "Learning in the Workplace: The Interplay between Learning Environments and Biography." Paper presented at the ESREA conference on Adult Education and the Labour Market VII, May 30-June 1, 2002. http://www.esrea.org/conferences/Papers/papers%20maj2002/Niels%20og%20Christian.pdf
A study of bakery employees investigated the relationship between the workplace learning environment and individual history. Whether employees learned something new and innovative depended on their own readiness to learn which, in turn, depended on their life historical learning trajectory.

Merriam, S. B., and Clark, M. C. ***Lifelines: Patterns of Work, Love, and Learning in Adulthood***. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.
Develops a method for graphing work, relationships, and learning across the life span in order to discern patterns of interaction and what they reveal about adult development and learning from life experience.

Merrill, B.; Field, J.; Gallacher, J.; and Crossan, B. "Understanding Participation in Learning for Non-traditional Adult Learners: Learning Careers and the Construction of Learning Identities." Paper presented at the ESREA Research Conference, Lisbon, Portugal, September 13-16, 2001. http://www.ulusofona.pt/inst/eventos/esrea/papers.htm
Explores the experiences of adults returning to learning in further education, using the concept of learning career as a framework. Concludes that learning careers are frequently complex and multidirectional and that learning identities may be extremely fragile and vulnerable to sudden changes in the learner's immediate social milieu.

Selwyn, N.; Gorard, S.; and Williams, S. "'We Are Guinea Pigs Really': Examining the Realities of ICT-based Adult Learning." ***Studies in the Education of Adults*** 34, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 23-41.
Interviews with 36 adult learners in ICT settings, using the concept of learning trajectories, revealed barriers to widening participation through ICT. Technical, social, economic, cultural, and political issues hinder the process, including lack of innovative instruction and human contact.

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